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POL 202

POLITICAL IDEAS

QUESTION

WHAT IS CONSERVATISM?

ABSTRACT

Conservatism and its modernizing, anti-traditionalist rivals, liberalism and socialism, are the most influential political philosophies and ideologies of the post enlightenment era. Conservatives criticize their rivals for making a utopian exaggeration of the power of theoretical reason, and of human perfectibility. Conservative ideology is based on what they regard as experience rather than reason; for them, the ideal and practical's are inseparable. Most commentators regard conservatism as a modern political philosophy, even though it exhibits the standpoint of paternalism or authority rather than freedom. John gray states that while liberalism is the dominant political ideology of the modern age, conservatism, despite appealing to tradition, is also a response to the challenges of modernity. The roots of all three standpoints "may be traced back to the crisis of seventeenth-century England, but crystallized into definite traditions of thought and practice only after the French revolution of 1789.

Popularly, "conservative" is a generic term for "right wing viewpoint occupying the political spectrum between liberalism and fascism". Philosophical commentator offers a more distinctive characterization. Many treat it as a standpoint that is skeptical of the abstract reasoning in politics, and the appeals instead to living tradition, allowing for the possibility of limited political reform. On the view, conservatism is neither dogmatic reaction, nor the right-wing radicalism of Margaret thatcher or contemporary American "neo-conservatism". Other commentators, however, contrast this "pragmatic conservatism" with a universalist "rational conservatism" that is not skeptical of the reason, and that regards a community with hierarchy of authority as most conducive to human well-being.

Unlike liberalism and socialism, conservatism has suffered philosophical neglect. Many deny tht it is an ideology, or even a political philosophy, regarding it instead as a disposition that resists theoretical expression a "non-ideology" that attempts to avoid the errors of ideologies. Is it an ancient attitude, or one that developed only in response to enlightenment rationality and its political products, liberalism and socialism? How is it related to contemporary "neo-conservatism"? is it a coherent position, or does it, as many have argued, fail to distinguish what is worth conserving from what is not? These are some of the questions commonly raised about conservatism and explored here.

WHAT IS CONSERVATISM?

Michael Oakshott described conservatism as a non-ideological preference for the familiar, tried, actual, limited, near, sufficient, convenient and present. Wikipedia defines conservatism as a political and social philosophy promoting traditional social institutions in the context of culture and civilization. Merriam-Webster defines it as a political philosophy based on tradition and social stability, stressing established institutions, and preferring gradual development to abrupt change. I define conservatism as a political

ideology that values the creation and maintenance of stable societies based upon a hierarchy of power lodged in a traditional class of the leaders and deep respect for the traditional values and institutes.

Conservatism isn't suspicious of the power of the state nor does it seek to limit its power. Traditional institutions, such as government and religion, along with traditional values are to be respected. Consequently, conservatism is suspicious of change, and if change is required, it seeks an evolutionary approach rather than a revolutionary approach. Let's look at some example.

Let's create a fictional state called "Abuadia" (does not exist), which is a state that closely adheres to conservative ideology. Abuadia is a small country run by a hereditary aristocracy consisting of a small group of families that founded the country several hundred years ago. Only member of the aristocracy may hold political office. Each family holds a seat in the country's senate, which is the legislature. The senators' vote in one of their member as doge. Abuadia has only one recognized religion and that has recognized moral authority over citizens. While citizens are eligible to become clergy, only member of the aristocracy hold high clerical offices.

The citizens of Abuadia accept their position in the community and understand their responsibilities, including a patriotic duty to the state and the obligation to be productive members of the community. They also recognize the importance of their traditional values and institutions, including the senate, the church and the family. Citizens understand that they are part of a larger community, which may mean placing the needs of their community above their individual goals or aspirations. Everybody knows their place in Abuadia and does not seek to change it. When change is needed, the leadership takes its time and carefully considers what actions need to be taken. If change occurs, it does so incrementally and within the values band institutions of Abuadia so as not to shock the tranquility of the society.

ORIGIN OF CONSERVATISM.

The roots of an Anglophone intellectual tradition of conservative thinking contrasting developments in Britain and America with a more reactionary and radical, form of conservatism emerging in Europe in response to the French revolution as represented by the Maistre and other so-called clerical philosophers, Bonald and chateaubriand are present already in the Elizabethan theologian Richard Hooker's late sixteenth-century magnum opus, the Laws of Ecclesiastical polity, Huntington suggests that in Hookers law, written two centuries before Burke's reflections on the revolution in France, are delineated every significant strand of Burkean thought . as demonstrated by wolin (1953) and Quinton (1978), this is nevertheless a conservative tradition most profoundly shaped by eighteenth-century Anglo-Irish statesmen Edmund burke, most palpably by his experience of the ideational and societal transformations in Europe prompted by the enlightenment and culminating in the French revolution and violent end to the Bourbon

monarchy of Louis XVI. In this sense, Burke's *Reflections* stands as the seminal contribution to what has become an Anglophone tradition of conservatism, the exponents of which are in identifying Edmund Burke as the conservative archetype and in assuming that the basic elements of his thought are the basic elements of conservatism. In its Burkean form, Sullivan (1976) describes it as a tradition broadly characterized by skepticism and pragmatism in the approach to political and social reform. It constitutes, according to Keene, a *via media* between the dangerous extremes of utopian politics and the 'fideistic' of reason and stands in stark contrast to the universalism and progressivism on which its rival ideologies, liberalism and socialism are based.

While Anglophone conservatism is Burkean in its origins it must also be recalled that this tradition contains within itself considerable variation, even within its articulation in an English context. In tying his conservative position in the *Reflections* closely to a specific time and place, Burke espoused rather excited notions of the exceptional nature of the English and their supposedly innate conservatism.

It is important to note also that key contributors to this Anglophone conservative canon, from Burke to the twentieth-century American political scientist Samuel Huntington, were not primarily philosophers, nor were they straightforwardly conservative in their political allegiances. Burke was immersed in the parliamentary politics and intrigues of his day on behalf of the Whig party. Indeed, Burke is more appropriately thought of as a statesman, politician and orator than as a philosopher *per se*. John Locke considered Burke not primarily a writer or thinker, but a party politician whose rhetorical genius and ability to generalize was such that his *Reflections* continue to be read as a classic of conservative political thought. Even a sternly critical judge of Burke and his intellectual legacy as constituting the primary obstacle to the realization of Enlightenment ideals, supposedly begetting even the twentieth-century fascist reaction to liberal democracy, Sternhell considered himself a strong defender of America's explicitly liberal tradition and his scholarship extended far beyond the realm of political philosophy into historical and empirical studies of political change, most notably his seminal study *Political Order in Changing Societies* (1968). Both Burke and Huntington are emblematic of the eclectic and empirically rooted nature of conservatism, by the contrast to which a scientific theory of socialism or a Rawlsian theory of justice are in their very exposition fundamentally alien to the ways in which scholars have attempted to formulate the basic contours of conservatism and key tenets of conservative political thought.

THE RELATIONSHIP TO LIBERALISM

To fully understand the emergence of a discernible body of conservative political thought, and a conservative ideology constituting a distinct political approach to social and political change, the relationship between classical liberalism and conservatism and the important early linkages between the

two ideologies must also be examined. This remains in both the British and American context a very complex relationship. One reason why this relationship is often overlooked, and differences between the classical liberal and the conservative often exaggerated in political discourse, is the conservatism becomes conflated with Toryism, and liberalism, certainly in its post-war incarnation, becomes defined primarily by its emphasis on individualism and negative freedom. This tendency is in the case of liberalism exaggerated by a selective reading of Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* which ignores important caveats to the abstracted individual (what in recent times comes to define the "neo-liberal" Smith) in his earlier and less widely read *theory of moral sentiments*. Hence Preece's reference to Smith as the most commonly maligned and misrepresented of thinkers.

Understanding the conservative tradition in Britain as merely defined by its dominant Tory elements, i.e. its emphasis on organism, corporatism and collectivism combined with a defense of monarchy, makes it difficult to understand the relationship between conservatism and a Conservative politics as championed by many in the conservative party since the ascent of 'Thatcherism' in the 1970s, and by the New Right with which the Thatcherite project became associated in the 1980s. Concepts like organism and corporatism are clearly discordant with neo-liberal tendencies of the New Right. Conversely, when conservatism in America becomes defined as merely a *laissez-faire* liberalism based on an abstracted reading of Locke (and Smith), ignoring the Locke who by invocation of the 'ever judicious Hooker' defends English medieval tradition, it becomes difficult to discern British and American strands of conservatism, each with a complex relationship to and anchoring in classical liberalism, have more in common than generally assumed. It is this anchoring in Whig liberalism which, for Preece, ultimately sets the 'Anglo-Saxon' nations apart from other western societies.

The interwoven history of 'Anglo-Saxon' liberalism and conservatism portrays the key historical context and ideological move out of which conservatism emerges is the desire to conserve the values and arrangements of the glorious revolution rather than those of the ancient regime and absolute monarchy. To conserve this settlement, in Britain, a PROTO-CONSERVATIVE like Burke was to some extent obliged to defend a set of classical liberal values. Leading Tory thinkers of that time Burke, the Marquis of Halifax, Lord Bolingbroke all wrote in the new liberal context expressed most completely by John Locke'. What exponents of this emerging conservative tradition had in common was a desire to reconcile liberty and authority, they admired the principles of Lockean constitution but were also concerned to limit its potential excesses. Concerns shared by these British conservatives and Whig liberals are important as they make it possible to understand how attempts by one ascendant grouping of modern conservatives, in Thatcher's conservative party and neo-liberals in Reagan's republican party to realign economic policymaking in Britain and America more closely with classical liberal principles need not be understood as a radical rejection of

the status quo. That status quo being the collectivist settlement emerging out of the World war 2, subscribed to in Britain by both one Nations Tories and Gaitskellites, and the broad consensus in favor of the new deal in America emerging in the wake of the great depression and attendant progressive policymaking following the war. (when democrats dominated congress and the white house). The aim of these modern conservatives were rather generated by a desire to rediscover classical liberal principles originally shaped in symbiosis with industrialization and expanding capitalist power, and on which stable democracy was deemed to ultimately depend.

CONSERVISM TODAY.

With massive social change throughout the twentieth century, produced by technological advances, world wars, decolonization and secularization, came inevitably also significant changes to modern conservative tradition, including conservative politics in Britain and America. The republican party is in the midst of an ideological insurrection that has mainstream conservative candidates for president languishing in the single digits. Meanwhile, the top three populist firebrands (Donald Trump, Ben Carson, and Ted Cruz) are polling at a combined 57 percent. On capitol hill, hardcore conservatives spent years making conservative John Boehner's life a living hell until he finally gave up and retired. These far-right congressmen's self-declared commitment to ideological purity was so fearsome, in fact, that the GOP spent weeks trying to find someone, who might dare to wield the speakers gavel over them.

What makes the pragmatic of conservatism different from liberalism is; less government regulations of economy instead of more, lower taxes etc. what make these positions pragmatic is that they are based on empirical claims about what works better in the real world. The moral ideological core of conservatism today presumes that life is a competition or race, that people are unequal in talent, drive and ambition, and those who end up on top deserve their victory and reward and those who end up at the bottom deserve their failure and hardship. Any attempt to overturn or manipulate this moral order whether through government regulations or change in habits amounts to an offense against justice itself.